

## A CRITIQUE OF WALTER RODNEY'S CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT

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### Abstract

It is within the purview of commonsense to say that no nation feels comfortable to be addressed as underdeveloped nation. But the reality of our world today informs that three categories exist in profiling nations. The first and second categories include the class of nations some scholars refer to as "developed nations" and "developing nations" respectively. The third category is the class of "underdeveloped nations". But the questions now are these: when we talk about development and underdevelopment what exactly do we mean? Do we really have a nation that is fully developed in all ramifications of life? Or on what grounds do we conclude that this country is developed and the other is underdeveloped? One scholar who has come up with illuminating and expository answers to these questions is Walter Rodney. In his best known book; *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* Rodney alludes to slavery and colonization as the bane of development in Africa. It is against this backdrop this paper examines and critiques Walter Rodney's concept of development. On the one hand, the paper concurs with Rodney's argument that every society has its own sense of development. On the other hand, the paper disagrees vehemently with Rodney's conclusion that only Europe underdeveloped Africa.

**Keywords:** Development, Underdevelopment, Economic Development, Colonization, Slave-trade.

## THE CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT

The best way to embark on a conceptual clarification of “development” is to look at what meanings some philosophers as well as some scholars have made of it. As a matter of fact, development is not so much a modern concept as some of its advocates would have us to believe. It made its appearance early in Greek philosophy, and preserved its position more or less, with the most diverse modifications, and frequently used interchangeably with the ideas of evolution, advancement, change, progress and becoming.

For instance, when Thales asserts that all things evolved from water and Anaximenes calls air the principle of all things, they must have considered individual beings and the phenomenal world as, a sort of development, even if they did not carry the process out in details. Heraclitus is not talking about something entirely different from development to have said that the material world is often in the state of flux. Developmental reasoning is found in the work of atomistic philosopher, Democritus. For he says everything in the phenomenal world comes into existence out of atoms. More so, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Darwin and Spencer were all philosophers of development in their own right because each of them paid attention to the concept of development in their respective works. Specifically, Hegelian dialectics was considered by Marx and Engels as the most comprehensive and profound doctrine of development because any other formulation of the principle of development, according to them, was one-sided and poor in content, and could only distort and mutilate the actual course of development in nature and in society<sup>1</sup>.

Apart from the above mentioned philosophers, there are other scholars whose names must be mentioned. For instance, Jonathan Crush underscores that development is a powerful language which has historically been used as a tool to reorder space, imagine and transform societies, rewrite socio-economic and political landscapes and replace one reality with another<sup>2</sup>. Development is also associated with how Europe, after undergoing industrial revolution and the bourgeois liberal revolutions, glorified itself as a dominant civilization and producer of modernity ahead of other parts of the globe<sup>3</sup>.

Loanna Kucuradi affirms that,

development can be seen from two senses; one from an active denotation- where it is seen as a human activity i.e. to frame, plan or work out a project. Second from a passive or reflective use- a critical sense. Here, it is a process undergone by a given bearer, which possesses or is expected to possess certain potentialities that are expected to be actualized up to a certain limit; after which decay sets in. This applies to living beings including human beings<sup>4</sup>.

Gustavo Esteva tells us that in common parlance, development describes a process through which the potentialities of an object or organism are released, until it reaches its natural, complete, full-fledged form<sup>5</sup>. Gustavo adds that development is frustrated when the plant or the animal failed to fulfill its genetic programme, or substituted for it. In such cases of failure, its growth was not development but rather an anomaly: pathological and even anti-natural behaviour.<sup>6</sup>

In Evandro Agazzi's view, development is always in a strict affinity with the idea of progress. Progress in this sense, means the same thing with change but not any kind of change<sup>7</sup>. Nkrumah elucidates that conflict, tension, struggle, strife are the conditions of progress...and development<sup>8</sup>. Nkrumah also agrees with Fanon that development is not only decolonization but also de-neo-colonization. This is because Fanon and Nkrumah see the political independence of Africa with its economic dependence on the West as neo-colonialism<sup>9</sup>. For Kolawole Ogundowole, meaningful development is self-realization<sup>10</sup>. Nyerere believes that liberation is inseparable from development; in fact he sees development as liberation<sup>11</sup>. But how does Rodney conceive the concept of development?

### WALTER RODNEY'S CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT

It is in his best celebrated book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* that Walter Rodney pours his heart out on the meaning of "development". In the book, Rodney asserts that development in human society is a many sided process. And that what development implies at level of individual differs from what it implies at level of social groups. According to him, development at level of individual implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being. While development at the level of social groups, implies an increasing capacity to regulate both internal and external relationships<sup>12</sup>. He adds that development in the past has always meant the increase in the ability to guard the independence of the social group and indeed to infringe upon the freedom of others - something that often came about irrespective of the will of the persons within the societies involved<sup>13</sup>. The tools with which men work and the manner, in which they organize their labour, Rodney argues, are important indices of social development.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, Rodney tells us that the term 'development' is often used in an exclusive economic sense. In this sense, he says that a society develops economically as its members increase jointly their capacity for dealing with the environment. This capacity for dealing with the environment is dependent on the extent to which they understand the laws of nature (science), on the extent to which they put that understanding into practice by devising tools (technology), and on the manner in which work is organised.<sup>15</sup>

He equally observes that there has been constant economic development within human society since the origins of man, because man has multiplied enormously his capacity to win a living from nature<sup>16</sup>. Rodney goes on to argue that

the magnitude of man's achievement is best understood by reflecting on the early history of human society and noting firstly, the progress from crude stone tools to the use of metals; secondly, the changeover from hunting and gathering wild fruit to the domestication of animals and the growing of food crops; and thirdly, the improvement in the character of work from being an individualistic activity towards an activity which assumes a social character through the participation of many<sup>17</sup>.

Similarly, he notes that every continent has independently participated in the early epochs of the extension of man's control over his environment – which means in effect that every continent can point to a period of economic development. Africa, being the original home of man, was obviously a major participant in the processes in which human groups displayed an ever increasing capacity to extract a living from the natural environment. Indeed, in the early period, Africa was the focus of the physical development of man as such, as distinct from other living beings<sup>18</sup>.

It is on this basis Rodney argued that development was universal because the conditions leading to each economic expansion were universal. Everywhere, man was faced with the task of survival by meeting fundamental material needs; and better tools were a consequence of the interplay between human beings and nature as part of the struggle for survival<sup>19</sup>. However, Rodney did not fail to point out that “while all societies have experienced development; it is equally true that the rate of development differed from continent to continent and within each continent different parts increased their command over nature at different rates”<sup>20</sup>.

Rodney rounds off his explanation on development by saying that the way and manner in which the bourgeoisie scholars talk about development is deceptive. This is because the bourgeoisie scholars, according to him, concentrate attention narrowly on “economic development”. This explains why average bourgeoisie scholars often define development as simply a matter of the combination of given factors of production: namely land, population, capital, technology, specialization and large-scale production<sup>21</sup>.

The deception in the bourgeoisie's definition of development, according to Rodney, is in the omission of some fundamental issues which are not supposed to be found wanting. For instance,

no mention is made of the exploitation of the majority which underlay all development prior to Socialism. No mention is made of the social relations of production or of classes. No mention is made of the way that the factors and relations of production combine to form a distinctive system or mode of production, varying from one historical epoch to another. No mention is made of imperialism as a logical phase of capitalism<sup>22</sup>.

As such, Rodney insists that development cannot be seen purely as an economic affair, but rather as an overall social process which is dependent upon the outcome of man's efforts to deal with his natural environment.

Concerning the term “underdevelopment”, it is obvious from his explanation that he harbors no intellectual feelings. This happens when Rodney bluntly says that “underdevelopment is not absence of development, because every people have developed in one way or another to a greater or lesser extent”<sup>23</sup>. In his view, the term “underdevelopment” makes sense only as a means of comparing levels of development. This is because human social development has been uneven from time immemorial. And the moment that one group appears to be wealthier than others, Rodney says, some

enquire is bound to take place as to the reason for the difference<sup>24</sup>. Accordingly, he says that one of the ideas behind underdevelopment is a comparative one. For him, it is possible to compare the economic conditions at two different periods for the same country and determine whether or not it had developed; and (more importantly) it is possible to compare the economies of any two countries or sets of countries at any given period in time<sup>25</sup>.

Therefore, he maintains that “if underdevelopment were related to anything other than comparing economies, then the most underdeveloped country in the world would be U.S.A., which practices external oppression on a massive scale, while internally there is a blend of exploitation, brutality, and psychiatric disorder”<sup>26</sup>. Apart from the comparative meaning of the term underdevelopment, a second and even more indispensable component of modern underdevelopment, according to Rodney, is that it expresses a particular relationship of *exploitation*: namely, the exploitation of one country by another. All of the countries named as ‘underdeveloped’ in the world are exploited by others; and the underdevelopment with which the world is now pre-occupied is a product of capitalist, imperialist and colonialist exploitation. African and Asian societies were developing independently until they were taken over directly or indirectly by the capitalist powers<sup>27</sup>. Indeed, many underdeveloped countries in Africa and elsewhere are becoming more underdeveloped in comparison with the world’s great powers, because their exploitation by the metropolises is being intensified in new ways<sup>28</sup>.

Rodney, however, holds the belief that exploitation from external sources is the bane of development in Africa. He means exactly this when he says that the most profound reasons for the economic backwardness of a given Africa nation are not to be found inside that nation. All that we can find inside are symptoms of underdevelopment the secondary factors that make for poverty. In the same manner, he tells us that the capitalists of Western Europe are the ones who actively extend their exploitation from inside Europe to cover the whole of Africa. The slave traders who came to Africa, in Rodney’s claim, started the process of underdevelopment. They stagnated the economic growth by taking away the productive class from African society thereby laying the foundation for imperialist domination of the continents<sup>29</sup>.

Coming from the aforementioned, Rodney concludes that development and underdevelopment are not only comparative terms, but they also have a dialectical relationship with each other because the two concepts help to produce each other by interaction. By and large, Rodney’s message is that Africa’s underdevelopment is not an internal condition, but one that is imposed upon it by the Western world.

### **3.0A CRITIQUE OF RODNEY’S CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT**

Having diagnosed Walter Rodney’s concept of development, it becomes a matter of expediency to talk about the strength as well as the weakness of his concept of development. We dare say that his explanation of “development” as something

inseparable from human existence is well-informed. This is because there is no period in the history of mankind that records a complete stagnation in culture, politics, economy, religion, education and other social endeavors. Given this, one can conveniently argue that man is a “being” that is endowed with natural propensity to develop. The only difference, which of course has been noted by Rodney, is that two societies cannot develop simultaneously in all ramifications of life. The reason for this is largely connected to the ‘superstructure’ of human society. That is to say, as human beings battled with the material environment, they created forms of social relations, forms of government, patterns of behaviour and systems of belief which together constituted the superstructure-which was never exactly the same in any two societies<sup>30</sup>. This accounts for the reason why this paper agrees with Rodney’s position that “development” is not a concept that should be monopolized by any continent or country. Rather, it is a term that has a universal application and it is inseparable from human existence. This of course is enough to debunk the position of many European scholars who believe that “development” is synonymous with Euro-American civilization.

We also want to concur with Rodney’s position that the term development should not be seen purely as economic affairs. The crux of the matter here is that the moment “development” is regarded as purely economic affairs; it would amount to treating the part of the whole as the whole. In other words, one would only be grappling with a narrow understanding of “development”. Development, as we want to argue here, is deeper in meaning than just economic affairs. It exists in other spheres of human life. That is why we can talk about other areas of life in which development also takes place. Rodney relates historical Africa as a collection of vibrant cultures endowed with the subtleties of art, music, religion, knowledge and social relations. All these are pointer to the fact that Africa is also a major contributor to world’s civilization.

At this juncture, let us now bring to focus the weakness of Walter Rodney’s concept of development. In this respect, we want to stand against his thesis that Europe alone underdeveloped Africa. Though it is the case that Rodney supports his thesis with statistical and historical evidences in his book quoted above but it is not the case that his overall claim is not without a fault. This is because Rodney fails to dwell extensively on the role played by Africans in making slave trade, colonialism, and even neo-colonialism successful adventures for the Europeans.

For instance, history has it that a handful Europeans actually came to Africa to engage in slave trade. The same history also has that by 1807 three million slaves had been transported to the Americas on British ships and by 1867 between 7 and 10 million Africans had been shipped as slaves to the New World<sup>31</sup>. Akinjide Osuntokun specifically tells us that “the disturbed situation arising from competition for power amongst the putative kingdoms of Ibadan, Ijaiye and the new Oyo itself and Ekiti Parapo confederation led to hundreds of thousands of people being carried into the Atlantic slave trade....”<sup>32</sup>The

question which readily comes to mind in this kind of scenario is: how did these handful Europeans able to capture millions of Africans? Or, what types of strategy did they adopt to achieve such a tremendous result? One strong clue to the question is that the European slave traders triumphed as a result of the support given them by some Africans. We were told that a good number of Africans sold their brothers and sisters, relatives, sons and daughters, subjects, etc. to slavery out of sheer wickedness, and in the name of immediate economic gain without minding whatever consequence(s) that may follow. Given this, one would be right to say that if Europe had truly underdeveloped Africa then some wicked and greedy Africans also connived with the Europeans to underdevelop Africa. Instead of talking about how Europe underdeveloped Africa, Rodney, in our own understanding, should have talked about how Africans and a handful Europeans started the dance of shame of Africa's underdevelopment.

Even in this contemporary time, many African leaders if not all, are regarded as accomplices of neo-colonialism. The reason being that the African leaders, which assumed power after independence continued with the same denigration and oppression of the African people. To buttress this point, it is on record that many African leaders after independence created a political atmosphere that could encourage their corrupt tendencies especially, that of looting the treasury. What is even more appalling is that many of the leaders do not deem it necessary to invest the proceeds of their corrupt practices in African continent. Instead, they feel more comfortable to transfer the money which they had looted from the treasury to Swiss bank and other drain pipe projects abroad. How would Africa develop if the money that is meant for its socio-economic and infrastructural development is transferred fraudulently to a foreign bank?

## THE WAY FORWARD

The simple call is for Africa and Africans to unite so as to fashion out a developmental concept that will appeal to the reality of African people of today. Presently, African thought is locked into Western thought about development. What is needed first, as Francis Fanon rightly observed, is mental decolonization, before we can think of an African development. The starting point is to liberate our African languages so as to communicate development issues using indigenous terms familiar to the African grassroots. Today, because of the use of European languages, debate on development has become an elite preserve, ring-fenced by foreign languages. This makes it hard for the grassroots to contribute to the development discourse while in reality they are the recipients of this development.

The second step is restoration of African dignity and self-respect through taking seriously African thought on development. This means that African history will have to be put in the same status with that of the West. African history is still 'colonized' by European analogies. True meaning of the concept of development must flow from African context and African historical realities. It is on the basis of this we want to agree with Kolawole Ogundowole that meaningful development is nothing other than self-development. And self-development means the ability to develop a clear and a critical consciousness about oneself; one's potential powers and possible direction of growth.

To this end, we feel obliged in this paper to recommend the philosophy of "self-reliance" as a plausible and reasonable way out of the "syndrome of underdevelopment" imposed on Africa by Africans and Europeans. Self-reliance, as Ogundowole explains, demands of all and sundry competence, dedication, confidence, national awareness, and above all, originality, inventiveness and creativity which are necessary facts for self-respect and self-realisation<sup>33</sup>. It is by embracing the philosophy of self-reliance that Africa would be able to liberate itself from Rodney's aphorism of "how Europe underdeveloped Africa". When this is done, Africa can then define its own development path without being receptive to the nebulous, half-baked and ill-contextualized Euro-American conception of development.



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